

Historical Achashverosh



The Persian period of Jewish history presents a particular challenge to the Torah-true historian. In order to understand this historical period, one has to recognize three different and often contradictory layers of the relevant data: the biblical, rabbinic and historical.

A. Biblical layer

The main biblical source for the Persian period, the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, mentions at least four Persian kings: Koresh, Daryavesh, Achashverosh and Artakhshasta. While this book mostly focuses on the mission of Ezra and Nechemia in the days of king Artakhshasta and the contemporary Kohen Gadol, Eliashib ben Joiakim, it also informs us about the later generations of the Jews who were living under the leadership of three generations of the Kohanim Gedolim: Joiada ben Eliashib, Johanan ben Joiada and Jaddua ben Johanan (Nehemiah 12:10-11).

B. Rabbinic layer

According to Seder Olam Rabbah (SO) of the 2nd century CE, the work that forms the basis for almost all rabbinic chronology, the period from the defeat of the Babylonians by the Persians until the fall of the Persian Empire encompassed 52 years (369 to 317 BCE) and spanned the reigns of three Persian kings: Koresh, Achashverosh and Daryavesh. The SO chronology adopts the 490 years period predicted at Daniel 9:24-27, as a period between destruction of the First and Second Temples. Accordingly, the First Temple was destroyed in **421 BCE**.

C. Historical layer

According to the chronology that is universally accepted by historians today (conventional chronology), this period of Persian rule encompassed about 210 years (539 to 330 BCE) and during this period more than ten Persian kings reigned: Cyrus the Great, Cambyses, Darius the Great, Xerxes the Great, Artaxerxes I, Darius II, Artaxerxes II, Artaxerxes III, Artaxerxes IV and Darius III. According to this chronology, the First Temple was destroyed in **586 BCE**. In other words, there is a **165 years** discrepancy between the SO and conventional chronologies.

Rav Shimon Schwab described this challenge well in his article "Comparative Jewish Chronology":

"The gravity of this intellectual dilemma posed by such enormous discrepancies must not be underestimated. The unsuspecting students-including the pupils of our Yeshivah and Beth Jacob High Schools-are faced with a puzzle that appears insoluble. How could it have been that our forebears had no knowledge of a period in history, otherwise widely known and amply documented, which lasted over a span of 165 years and which was less than 600 years removed in time from the days of the Sages who recorded our traditional chronology in Seder Olam? Is it really possible to assume that some form of historical amnesia had been allowed to take possession of the collective memory of an entire people? This dilemma is most unfortunate. For it would appear that the only course to take would be either to "correct" secular ancient history by 165 years which we would then have to call "fictitious", or else to declare that our traditional calendar is based not on historical calculations but on Aggadic pronouncements."

While it is up to the reader to investigate and make a decision on the matter (please, see "Further Readings" section), this article will focus on who was a historical Achashverosh, or Achashverosh according to the conventional chronology.

From the historical background and the content of the Megillat Esther, we can deduce the following information about Achashverosh: Achashverosh was a Persian king who ruled over the Achaemenid Persian Empire at its territorial apex, from Indus Valley (Hodu) to costal Sudan (Cush). He ruled for at least 12 years from his capital city of Susa (Shushan), where he had a splendid palace. His royal decrees were written in many languages and scripts. He was also known for an assassination attempt on his life committed by his servants.

The Megillah does not mention the names of the kings who preceded or followed Achashverosh. But Achashverosh is also mentioned one time in the fourth chapter of the book of Ezra in the context of other Persian kings, who are listed in the following order:

- A. They would hire advisors against them to frustrate their plan, all the days of **Koresh**, the king of Persia, even until the reign of **Daryavesh**, the king of Persia. (Ezra 4:5)
- B. And in the reign of **Achashverosh**, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the dwellers of Judea and Jerusalem. (Ezra 4:6)
- C. And in the days of **Artakhshasta**, they wrote a complaint to the king that the Jews who arrived in Jerusalem by the king's order are rebuilding the city walls. (Ezra 4:7-23)

According to the simple reading of these verses, Achashverosh reigned between Daryavesh and Artakhshasta.

Before we begin our journey through history, we will need to know the following information about the relevant time period:

Accession Year System

Ancient kingdoms had different ways of recording the regnal years of their kings. The Assyrians and Babylonians, as well as their heirs Persians, credited the entire calendar year when a king died to his reign, even if he died at the beginning of the year and his successor ruled eleven months of that year. The first year for a new king would be designated his "accession year" and the new king's "year 1" did not begin until the first day of the following calendar year, which was the 1st of Nisan, Babylonian New Year's Day. Historians call this method the "accession year system" or the "post-dating system".

Chronology of the Great Empires

Event	Period	Historical Date
Fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire to the Babylonians		609 BCE
Neo-Babylonian Empire	70 years	
Fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire to the Persians		539 BCE
Achaemenid Persian Empire	210 years	
Fall of the Achaemenid Persian Empire to the Greeks		330 BCE
Greco-Roman Period	400 years	
Destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans		70 CE

Part I. Rise of the Persian Empire

Neo-Babylonian Empire (609-539 BCE)

Early in the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Sinsharishkun, the southern official or general Nabopolassar used ongoing political instability in Assyria, caused by an earlier brief civil war between Sinsharishkun and the general Sin-shumu-lishir, to revolt. In 626 BCE, Nabopolassar assaulted and successfully seized the cities of Babylon and Nippur. Sinsharishkun's response was quick and decisive; by October of that same year the Assyrians had recaptured Nippur and besieged Nabopolassar at the city of Uruk. Sinsharishkun failed to capture Babylon and Nabopolassar endured the Assyrian siege of Uruk, repulsing the Assyrian army.

In November of 626 BCE, Nabopolassar was formally crowned as King of Babylon, restoring Babylonia as an independent kingdom after more than a century of direct Assyrian rule. With only small successes during campaigns in northern Babylonia from 625 to 623 BCE and more southern cities, such as Der, joining Nabopolassar, Sinsharishkun led a massive counterattack in 623 BCE. Though this counterattack was initially successful and Sinsharishkun might have been ultimately victorious, he had to abandon the campaign due to a revolt in Assyria threatening his position as king.

The absence of the Assyrian army allowed the Babylonians to conquer the last remaining Assyrian seats of power in Babylonia from 622 BCE to 620 BCE. Both Uruk and Nippur, the cities who had shifted the most between Assyrian and Babylonian control, were firmly in Babylonian hands by 620 BCE and Nabopolassar had consolidated his rule over all of Babylonia. Following further Babylonian conquests and further failures by Sinsharishkun to stop Nabopolassar, despite receiving military aid from Egypt, the Assyrian Empire quickly began to fall apart.

In October or November 615 BCE, the Medes, also ancient enemies of Assyria, under King Cyaxares entered Assyria and conquered the region around the city of Arrapha. In July or August of 614 BCE, the Medes began attacking the cities of Kalhu and Nineveh. They then besieged Assur, the ancient political and religious heart of Assyria. The siege was successful and the city endured a brutal sack. Nabopolassar only arrived at Assur after the plunder had already begun and met with Cyaxares, allying with him and signing an anti-Assyrian pact.

In April or May 612 BCE, at the start of Nabopolassar's fourteenth year as King of Babylon, the combined Medo-Babylonian army marched on Nineveh. From June to August of that year, they besieged the Assyrian capital and in August the walls were breached, leading to another lengthy and brutal sack during which Sinsharishkun is assumed to have died.

Sinsharishkun's successor Ashur-uballit II, the final king of Assyria, was defeated at Harran in 609 BCE. About the same time, king Josiah of Judah was killed in the Battle of Megiddo when the Egyptian army under pharaoh Necho II, Assyria's ally, marched through the land of Israel to join Assyrians at Harran. Egypt continued the war against Babylon for a few years before being decisively defeated by Nabopolassar's crown prince Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish in 605 BCE.



Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (August 605 BCE – October 562 BCE), was the longest-reigning and most powerful monarch of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Nebuchadnezzar ascended the throne in the summer of 605 BCE and subsequently fought several campaigns in the West, where Egypt was trying to organize a coalition against him. His first regnal year began in Nisan 604 BCE.

His conquest of Judah is described in the biblical Books of Kings, Chronicles and Jeremiah. The Babylonian king's two sieges of Jerusalem (in 597 and 587 BCE) are depicted in 2 Kings 24–25. The Book of Jeremiah calls Nebuchadnezzar the "destroyer of nations" (Jeremiah 4:7) and gives an account of the second siege of Jerusalem (587 BCE) and the looting and destruction of the First Temple (Book of Jeremiah 39:1–10; 52:1–30). Nebuchadnezzar's assault on Egypt four months before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE is represented in Ezekiel as a divine initiative undertaken "by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon".

"In the seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar [598 BCE], in the month Chislev, the king of Babylon assembled his army, and after he had invaded the land of Hatti, he laid siege to the city of Judah. On the second day of the month of Adar [597 BCE], he conquered the city and took the king [Jeconiah] prisoner. He installed in his place a king [Zedekiah] of his own choice, and after he had received a rich tribute, he sent forth to Babylon." (The Babylonian Chronicles)

The First Temple was destroyed 11 years after the exile of Jeconiah, in the summer of 586 BCE, which was the 19th year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (see 2 Kings 25:8, Ezekiel 40:1).

By 572 BCE Nebuchadnezzar was in full control of Babylonia, Assyria, Phoenicia, Israel, Philistine, northern Arabia, and parts of Asia Minor. Nebuchadnezzar fought the Pharaohs Psammetichus II (595-589 BCE) and Apries (589-570 BCE) throughout his reign, and in 568 BCE during the reign of Pharaoh Amasis II (570-526 BCE), invaded Egypt itself.

Amel-Marduk (Evil-Merodach) (562–560 BCE) was the son and successor of Nebuchadnezzar. He reigned for only two years. According to the Biblical Book of Kings, he pardoned and released Jeconiah, king of Judah, who had been a prisoner in Babylon for thirty-seven years. Allegedly, because Evil Merodach tried to modify his father's policies, he was murdered by Neriglissar, his brother-in-law.

Neriglissar (560–556 BCE) conducted successful military campaigns against Cilicia, which had threatened Babylonian interests. Neriglissar however reigned for only four years, being succeeded by the young Labashi-Marduk, who was murdered in a conspiracy only nine months after his inauguration.

Nabonidus (556–539 BCE) took an interest in Babylon's past, excavating ancient buildings and displaying his archeological discoveries in a museum. In most ancient accounts, he is depicted as a royal anomaly. Nabonidus is supposed to have worshiped the moon-god Sîn beyond all the other gods, to have paid special devotion to Sîn's temple in Harran, where his mother was a priestess, and to have neglected the Babylonian primary god, Marduk. He left the capital and traveled to conquer the desert oasis city of Tayma in north Arabia early in his reign, from which he only returned after ten years. Meanwhile, his son and crown prince **Belshazzar** ruled from Babylon.

Achaemenid Persian Empire (539-330 BCE)

Nabonidus's reign came to an abrupt end with the quick victory over his empire by Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE. After the decisive Battle of Opis in **October 539 BCE**, the Persians entered Babylon without a fight. Several sources state that Nabonidus was captured and spared; however, Belshazzar is believed to have been killed.



Cyrus the Great, who conquered Babylon in 539 BC, depicted with a Hemhem crown, or four-winged Cherub tutelary divinity

Gubaru, governor of Gutium, and the army of Cyrus without a battle entered Babylon on October 12th. Seventeen days later, on October 29th, Cyrus himself entered Babylon, where he was proclaimed king, issued royal proclamations and appointed governors of his newly conquered realm. Gubaru (**Darius the Mede**) was then appointed as the provisional ruler over the new province of Babylon, dying soon after the conquest.

Cyrus II, the Great, or Kurosh in Persian, reigned 559–530 BCE (559 BCE - king of Persia; 549 BCE - king of Media; 547 BCE - king of Lydia; 539 BCE - king of Babylon). Cyrus was born to Cambyses I, King of Anshan, and Mandane, daughter of Astyages, King of Media.

In the spring of **538 BCE**, in his first regnal year as king of Babylon, and upon the completion of 70 years of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Cyrus issued the following proclamation:

"So said Cyrus, the king of Persia, 'All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of the heavens delivered to me, and He commanded me to build Him a House in Jerusalem, which is in Judea. Who is among you of all His people, may his God be with him, and he may ascend to Jerusalem, which is in Judea, and let him build the House of the Lord, God of Israel; He is the God Who is in Jerusalem'" (Ezra 1:1-4)



The Cyrus Cylinder

Cyrus the Great proclaimed himself King of Kings, "king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four corners of the world" in the famous Cyrus Cylinder, which also mentions Cyrus's son and successor Cambyses II. Cyrus the Great's dominions comprised the largest empire the world had ever seen. At the end of Cyrus' rule, the Achaemenid Empire stretched from Asia Minor in the west to the Indus River in the east.

Cambyses II, or *Kabujiya* in Persian, reigned for 8 years from 530 to 522 BCE. He was the second King of Kings of the Achaemenid Empire, son and successor of Cyrus the Great and his mother was Cassandane. Before his accession, Cambyses had briefly served as the governor of northern Babylonia under his father. Afterwards, he continued to roam in the Babylonian cities of Babylon and Sippar, before being appointed by his father as co-ruler in **530 BCE**, who set off to mount an expedition against the Massagetae of Central Asia, where he met his end. Cambyses thus became the sole ruler of the vast Achaemenid Empire, facing no noticeable opposition.

His relatively brief reign was marked by his conquests in Africa, notably **Egypt**, which he conquered after his victory over the Egyptian pharaoh Psamtik III (r. 526–525 BCE) at the battle of Pelusium in **525 BCE**. After having established himself in Egypt, he expanded his holdings in Africa even further, such as his conquest of Cyrenaica. In the spring of **522 BCE**, Cambyses hurriedly left Egypt to deal with a rebellion in Persia.



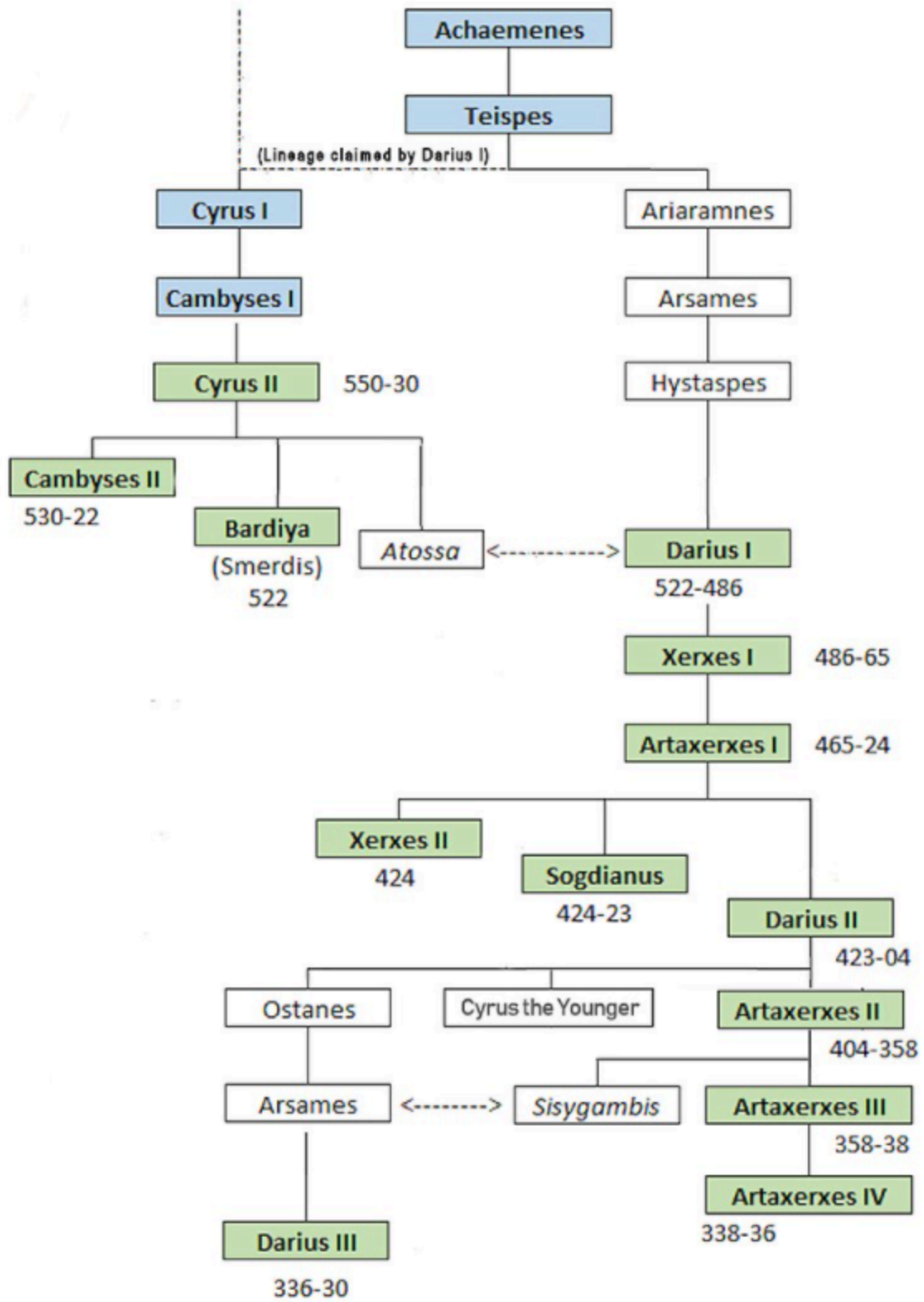
Gaumata being trampled upon by Darius the Great, Behistun inscription. The Old Persian inscription reads "This is Gaumāta, the Magian. He lied, saying "I am Bardiya, the son of Cyrus, I am king"."

While en-route in Syria (Eber-Nari), he received a wound to the thigh, which was soon affected by gangrene. Cambyses died three weeks later at a location called Agbatana, which is most likely the modern city of Hama. He died childless, and was succeeded by the impostor Gaumata, who claimed to be his younger brother Bardiya. Gaumata ruled for a short period before being overthrown by Darius the Great, Cambyses' lance-bearer at the time, who went on to increase the power of the Achaemenids even further.

The name of Cambyses was discovered to be ***Kabujiya*** in Old Persian. His name was recorded as **כנבוזי/Kanbūzī** in Aramaic documents from Egypt from the fifth

century BCE. He did not reign long enough to be Achashverosh. Nor did he reign over the Indus Valley (Hodu), which was conquered by Darius the Great.

The reigns of Cambyses and Bardiya were not explicitly mentioned in the Tanach, but they were alluded in Ezra 4:5: "They would hire advisors against them to frustrate their plan, all the days of **Koresh**, the king of Persia, **even until** the reign of **Daryavesh**, the king of Persia." This verse implies that one or more kings reigned between Cyrus and Darius. Otherwise, it would not have used the word **ve-ad (even until)**.





Darius I, or *Darayavaush* in Persian, commonly known as **Darius the Great**, was the fourth Persian King of Kings of the Achaemenid Empire, reigning for 36 years from September 522 BCE until his death in October 486 BCE. He was 28 years old when he came to the throne and both his father and grandfather were still alive at that time.

He ruled the empire at its peak, when it included much of West Asia, parts of the Caucasus, parts of the Balkans (Thrace-Macedonia, and Paeonia), most of the Black Sea coastal regions, Central Asia, as far as the Indus Valley in the far east and portions of north and northeast Africa including Egypt (*Mudrâya*), eastern Libya, and coastal Sudan.

Darius, the former Cambyses' lance-bearer, ascended the throne by overthrowing the impostor, who claimed to be the legitimate Achaemenid monarch Bardiya. The new king met with rebellions throughout his kingdom and quelled them each time. **A major event in Darius's life was his expedition to punish Athens and Eretria for their aid in the Ionian**

Revolt and subjugate Greece in 492 BCE. Although ultimately ending in failure at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, Darius succeeded in the re-subjugation of Thrace, expansion of the empire through the conquest of Macedon, the Cyclades and the island of Naxos and the sacking of the city of Eretria.

Darius organized the empire by dividing it into provinces and placing satraps to govern it. **He organized Achaemenid coinage as a new uniform monetary system, along with making Aramaic the official language of the empire.** He also put the empire in better standing by building roads and introducing standard weights and measures. **Darius built the Royal Road 1,677 miles (2,699 km) long to facilitate rapid communication throughout his very large empire from Susa to Sardis.** Through these changes, the empire was centralized and unified. Darius also worked on construction projects throughout the empire, focusing on Susa, Pasargadae, Persepolis, Babylon, and Egypt.



In Susa (Shushan), Darius built a new palace complex in the north of the city. An inscription states that the palace was destroyed during the reign of Artaxerxes I, but was later rebuilt.

Darius was the son of Hystaspes and the grandson of Arsames.

Darius married Atossa, daughter of Cyrus, with whom he had four sons: Xerxes, Achaemenes, Masistes and Hystaspes. Although Artobazanes was Darius's first-born from his other wife, Xerxes became heir and the next king through the influence of Atossa; she had great authority in the kingdom as Darius favored her the most of all his wives.

The Second Temple construction had resumed, on Elul 24th 520 BCE, in the 2nd year of Darius the Great (Haggai 1:15). It was led by Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel, Jeshua ben Jehozadak, the Kohen Gadol, and the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. **The construction was completed in the 6th year of Darius (Ezra 6:15), which was 516/515 BCE, on Adar 3rd in the early 515 BCE, seventy years after the First Temple was destroyed in the summer of 586 BCE.**

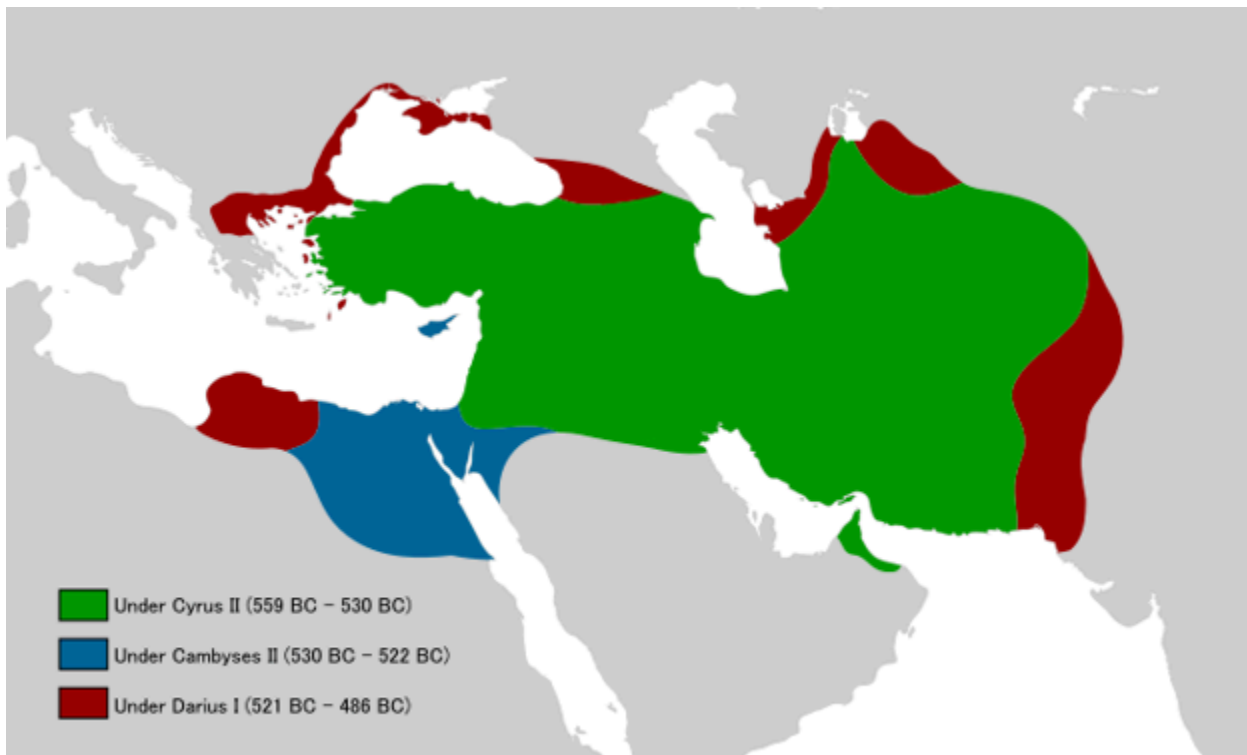
Darius the Great left many inscriptions describing himself and his kingdom. We will quote some of them:



“I am Darius, the great king, king of kings, the king of Persia, the king of countries, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsames, the Achaemenid. King Darius says: My father is Hystaspes; the father of Hystaspes was Arsames; the father of Arsames was Ariaramnes; the father of Ariaramnes was Teispes; the father of Teispes was Achaemenes. King Darius says: By the grace of Ahura Mazda am I king; Ahura Mazda has granted me the kingdom.” (Behistun, Darius' Inscription)

“A great god is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth, who created yonder heaven, who created men, who created happiness for man, who made Darius king. One king for many, one lord for all. **I am Darius, the great king, king of kings, king of countries containing all kinds of men, king in this great earth far and wide, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenian.**” (Gandj Nameh, Darius' Inscription)

“A great god is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Darius king, one king of many, one lord of many. I am Darius the great king, king of kings, king of countries containing all kinds of men, king in this great earth far and wide, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenid, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage.” (Upper register of Darius' tomb, Darius' Inscription)



Evolution of the Achaemenid Persian Empire



Xerxes I, or *Khshaya-rsha* in Persian, *Achshi-arshu* in Akkadian, commonly known as **Xerxes the Great**, was the fifth King of Kings of the Achaemenid Empire, ruling for 21 years from October 486 BCE **until his assassination** in August 465 BCE at the hands of Artabanus, the captain of the royal bodyguard, who plotted to take over the throne.

He was the son and successor of Darius the Great and his mother was Atossa, a daughter of Cyrus the Great, the first Achaemenid king. Like his father and predecessor Darius I, he ruled the empire at its territorial apex.

Xerxes I is notable in Western history for his failed invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. His forces temporarily overran mainland Greece north of the Isthmus of Corinth until losses at Salamis and Plataea a year later reversed these gains and ended the second invasion decisively. However, Xerxes successfully crushed revolts in Egypt and Babylon. Xerxes also oversaw the completion of various construction projects at Susa and Persepolis. **He also**

maintained the Royal Road built by his father, completed the Susa Gate and built a palace in Susa (Shushan), his favorite winter capital.

Xerxes I's trilingual cuneiform inscription at Van, also known as the XV inscription, is located on the southern slope of a mountain adjacent to the Van Fortress, near Lake Van in present-day Turkey:



"A great god is Ahura Mazda, the greatest of the gods, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, created happiness for man, who made Xerxes king, one king of many, one lord of many. **I am Xerxes, the great king, king of kings, king of all kinds of people, king on this earth far and wide, the son of Darius the king, the Achaemenid.** Xerxes the great

king proclaims: King Darius, my father, by the favor of Ahura Mazda, made much that is good, and this niche he ordered to be cut; as he did not have an inscription written, then I ordered that this inscription be written. May Ahura Mazda protect, together with the gods, my kingdom and what I have done."

Xerxes is widely identified with the king Achashverosh in the book of Esther. His Persian name was ***Khshaya-rsha***. It is easily seen that name Khshaya-rsha is very close to the name אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ. In terms of the consonantal sounds ("kh", "sh", "r" and "sh"), the names are exactly the same. In Greek, these sounds had collapsed to "k", "s", "r", "s", or Ksers/Xerxes. The Kohen Gadol during the reign of Xerxes, according to Josephus, was Joiakim, the son of Jeshua ben Jehozadak (Antiquities, Book 11, Chapter 5).

According to Herodotus' writings, Xerxes had a "fondness" for women and a lack of control over his lust. His wife's name was Amestris, which has consonantal similarities with Esther: "s", "t", "r". His many known children by queen Amestris and other wives include: Darius, the firstborn, and his brother Hystaspes, both murdered by Artabanus; Artaxerxes; Achaemenes; Rhodogune; Amytis; Artarius; Tithraustes; Arsames; Parysatis and Ratashah.



Relief of Artaxerxes I, from his tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam

Artaxerxes I Longimanus, or Artakhshatra in Persian, (reigned: 465-424 BCE) was the sixth King of Kings of the Achaemenid Empire.

He was the third son of Xerxes and his mother was Amestris, who became an influential figure at his court.

After the Persians had been defeated at the Battle of the Eurymedon in 469 BCE, military action between Greece and Persia was at a standstill. When Artaxerxes took power, he introduced a new Persian strategy of weakening the Athenians by funding their enemies in Greece. This indirectly caused the Athenians to move the treasury of the Delian League from the island of Delos to the Athenian acropolis. This funding practice inevitably prompted renewed fighting in 450 BCE, where the Greeks attacked at the Battle of Cyprus. After that, the Peace of Callias was agreed among Athens, Argos and Persia in 449 BCE.

Artaxerxes left the following inscription in Persepolis:

“A great god is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth, who created that heaven, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Artaxerxes king, one king for many, one leader for all. **I am Artaxerxes, the great king, the king of kings, the king of countries with all kinds of men, the king in this earth far and wide, the son of king Xerxes, the grandson of Darius, the Achaemenid.** Artaxerxes the great king says: by the grace of Ahura Mazda, my father, king Xerxes, built this palace. After that, I built it. May Ahura Mazda and the gods preserve me, my kingdom, and what I have built.” (A1Pa inscription)

Artaxerxes I is identified as King Artakhshasta in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, who commissioned Ezra HaKohen and gave permission to Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra left Babylon on the 1st of Nisan in the seventh year of Artakhshasta [458 BCE], at the head of a company of Jews that included priests and Levites. They arrived in Jerusalem on the 1st of Av of that year (Ezra 7:9). Nehemiah served as the governor of Judea from 20th to 32nd year of Artakhshasta, 445-433 BCE.

According to Josephus, this Artaxerxes, king of Persia, “who reigned after Xerxes”, was the last Persian king depicted in the Tanach (Against Apion, Book 1:8). The Kohen Gadol during the reign of Artaxerxes was **Eliashib ben Joiakim** (Nehemiah 3:1).

The rest of history of the Persian Empire after the reign of Artaxerxes I to the fall of the final Persian king Darius III in 330 BCE was not recorded in the Tanach. However, the Tanach provides us with the succession of the Kohanim Gadolim of the Persian period at Nehemiah 12:10-11:

“And **Jeshua** begot Joiakim, and **Joiakim** begot Eliashib, and **Eliashib** begot Joiada. And **Joiada** begot **Johan**, and Johan begot **Jaddua**.”

According to Josephus, Jaddua ben Johan was the last Kohen Gadol of the Persian period, who had a memorable encounter with Alexander the Great, when Alexander marched through the Land of Israel in 332 BCE (Antiquities, Book 11, Chapter 8).

Part II. Decline of the Persian Empire



Darius II as depicted on his tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam

Darius II (Ochus) was the King of Kings of the Persian Empire from 423 BCE to 404 BCE. Artaxerxes I, who died in 424 BCE, was followed by his son Xerxes II. After a month and half Xerxes II was murdered by his brother Sogdianus. His illegitimate brother, Ochus, satrap of Hyrcania, rebelled against Sogdianus, and after a short fight killed him, and suppressed by treachery the attempt of his own brother Arsites to imitate his example. Ochus adopted the name Darius (Greek sources often call him Darius Nothos, "Bastard"). Neither the names Xerxes II nor Sogdianus occur in the dates of the numerous Babylonian tablets from Nippur; here effectively the reign of Darius II follows immediately after that of Artaxerxes I.

In 412 BCE, Darius II was led to Persian conquest of the greater part of Greek Ionia. When in 413 BCE, Athens supported the rebel Amorges in Caria, Darius II would not have responded had not the Athenian power been broken in the same year at Syracuse. As a result of that event, Darius II gave orders to his satraps in Asia Minor, Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus, to send in the overdue tribute of the Greek towns and to begin a war with Athens.

To support the war with Athens, the Persian satraps entered

into an alliance with Sparta. In 408 BCE he sent his son Cyrus to Asia Minor, to carry on the war with greater energy. Darius II died in 404 BCE, just before the final victory of the Egyptian general, Amyrtaeus, over the Persians in Egypt, which allowed Egypt to regain its independence.

Darius II left the following inscription in Ecbatana:

A great god is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth, who created that sky, who created humankind, who created happiness for humankind, who made Darius king, sole ruler of many people, sole sovereign of many people. **I am Darius, the great king, the king of kings, the king of all kinds of peoples, the king of this earth great and wide, the son of king Artaxerxes, Artaxerxes the son of king Xerxes, Xerxes the son of king Darius, the Achaemenid.** King Darius says: Ahura Mazda gave me these people. By the grace of Ahura Mazda, I am king of this world. May Ahura Mazda protect me, my house, and the kingdom he has given me! (D2Ha inscription)

Darius II was briefly mentioned in Nehemiah 12:22, where he is called Darius the Persian. The Kohen Gadol during his reign was Joiada ben Eliashib. The Aramaic letter from Elephantine in Egypt called "Petition to Bagoas" and dated as of 20th of Marcheshvan of the 17th year of Darius II (407 BCE) mentions Johanan ben Joiada as the Kohen Gadol at that time.



Relief of Artaxerxes II on his tomb at Persepolis, Iran

Artaxerxes II Mnemon (Arses) was King of Kings of Persia from 404 BCE until his death in 358 BCE. He was a son of Darius II and Parysatis.

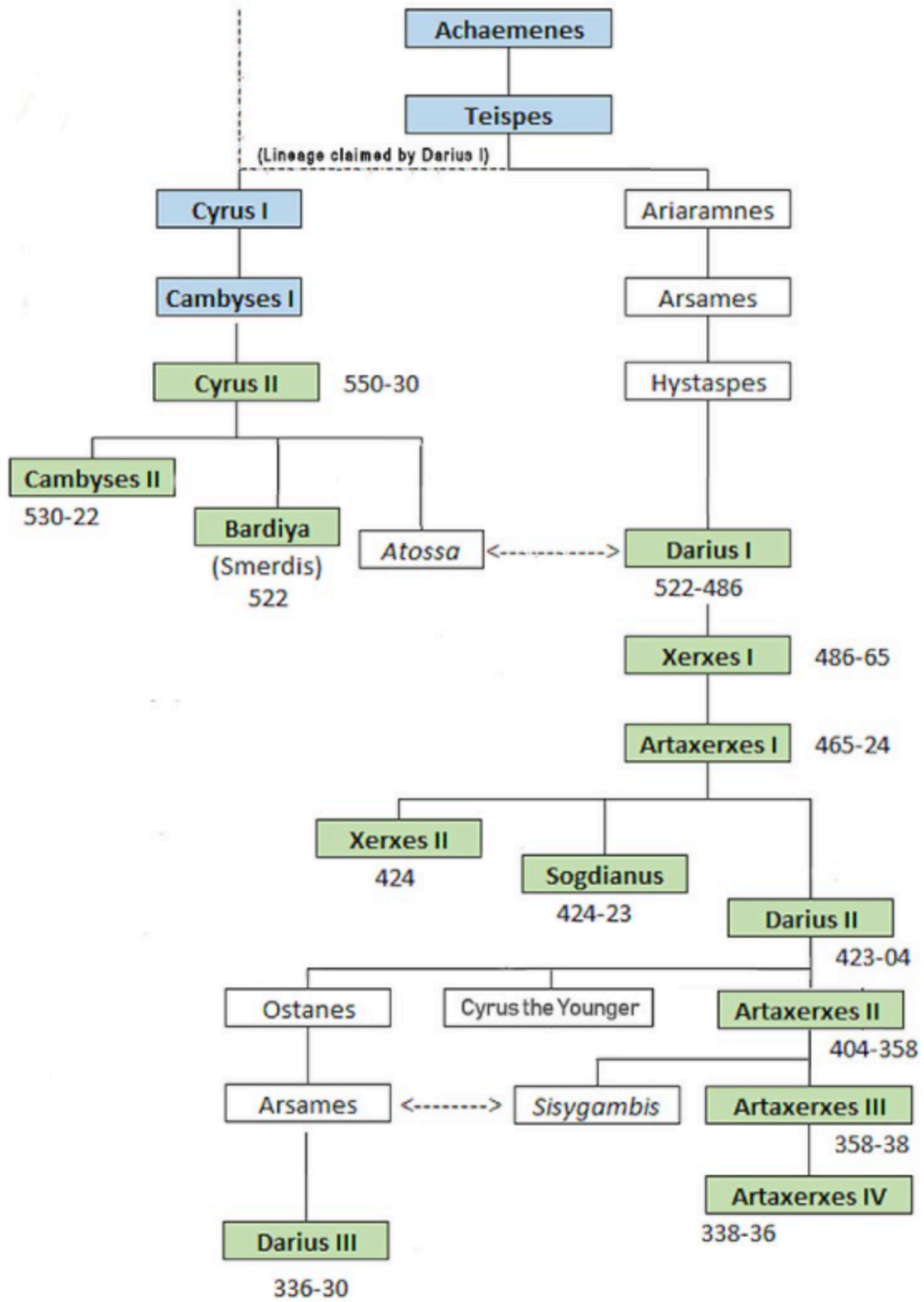
Artaxerxes became involved in a war with Persia's erstwhile allies, the Spartans, during the Corinthian War (395-387 BCE). The Spartans under their king Agesilaus II had started by invading Asia Minor in 396-395 BCE. In 386 BCE, Artaxerxes II betrayed his allies and came to an arrangement with Sparta, and in the Treaty of Antalcidas, he forced his erstwhile allies to come to terms. This treaty restored control of the Greek cities of Ionia and Aeolis on the Anatolian coast to the Persians, while giving Sparta dominance on the Greek mainland. In 385 BCE, he campaigned against the Cadusians.

Artaxerxes II left many inscriptions. Here is one of his inscriptions in Ecbatana:

“A great god is Ahura Mazda, the greatest of all gods, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created mankind, who created happiness for mankind, who made Artaxerxes king, one king for many, one ruler for all. **Artaxerxes, the great king, the king of kings, the king of all nations, the king of this world, says: I am the son of king Darius, Darius the son of king Artaxerxes, Artaxerxes the son of king Xerxes, Xerxes the son of king Darius, Darius the son of a man named Hystaspes, the Achaemenid.** King Artaxerxes says: I am king of the earth,

great and wide. Ahura Mazda gave me the kingdom; may Ahura Mazda protect me, the kingdom he gave to me, and my house.” (A2Hc inscription)

According to Josephus, the Kohen Gadol during the reign of Artaxerxes II was Johanan ben Joiada. The Persian governor Bagoas favored Johanan's brother Jeshua to replace him as the Kohen Gadol. During one of the quarrels they had in the Holy Temple, Johanan killed Jeshua in his anger. In turn, Bagoas polluted the Temple, imposed oppressive taxes and punished the Jews for seven years. After Johanan's death, his son Jaddua succeeded him as the Kohen Gadol (Antiquities, Book 11, Chapter 7).





Rock relief of Artaxerxes in Persepolis

Artaxerxes III (Ochus), was King of Kings of the Achaemenid Empire from 358 to 338 BCE. He was the son and successor of Artaxerxes II and his mother was Stateira.

Before ascending the throne Artaxerxes was a satrap and commander of his father's army. Artaxerxes came to power after one of his brothers was executed, another committed suicide, the last murdered and his father, Artaxerxes II died. Soon after becoming king, Artaxerxes murdered all of the royal family to secure his place as king. He started two major campaigns against Egypt. The first campaign failed, and was followed up by rebellions throughout the western part of his empire. In 343 BCE, Artaxerxes defeated Nectanebo II, the Pharaoh of Egypt, driving him from Egypt, stopping a revolt in Phoenicia on the way. Egypt was returned under Persian control.

In Artaxerxes' later years, Philip II of Macedon's power was increasing in Greece, where he tried to convince the Greeks to revolt against the Achaemenid Empire. His activities were opposed by Artaxerxes, and with his support, the city of Perinthus resisted a Macedonian siege.

Artaxerxes III left the following inscription in Persepolis:

“A great god is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth, who created yonder heaven, who created happiness for man, who made Artaxerxes king. One king for many, one leader of many. **The great king Artaxerxes, the king of kings, the king of countries, the king of this earth, says: I am the son of king Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes was the son of king Darius. Darius was the son of king Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes was the son of king Xerxes. Xerxes was the son of king Darius. Darius was the son of a man named Hystaspes. Hystaspes was a son of a man named Arsames, the Achaemenid.**” (A3Pa inscription)

Persia was experiencing a resurgence under Artaxerxes III, who reorganized his empire, and suppressed revolts throughout the country. However, the fortunes of Persia came to an abrupt end in autumn of 338 BCE, when Artaxerxes III was murdered by the ambitious eunuch and chiliarch Bagoas, who had the king poisoned. Artaxerxes III early death proved to be a problematic issue for Persia, and may have played a role in the weakening of the country. The majority of Artaxerxes III's sons, with the exception of Arses and Bisthanes, were also murdered by Bagoas. Bagoas, who wanted to be kingmaker, put the young Arses on the throne.

Artaxerxes IV (Arses), was the twelfth Achaemenid king of Persia from 338 to 336 BCE. He is known as Arses in Greek sources and that seems to have been his real name, but the Xanthus and potsherds from Samaria report that he took the royal name of Artaxerxes IV, following his father and grandfather. Arses was the youngest son of Artaxerxes III and his wife Atossa. Arses had several brothers, only one whose name is attested, a certain Bisthanes.

Around the same period, most of the Greek city-states had joined the Greek league under the leadership of the Macedonian king Philip II, who took advantage of the events in Persia by demanding compensation from the country for helping the town of Perinthus during the reign of Artaxerxes III. Arses declined, and as a result, a Greek expedition was started with Philip II as general, who sent 10,000 Macedonian soldiers into Asia in 336 BCE. At the same time, however, Arses was focused on trying to free himself from Bagoas' authority and influence; he made an unsuccessful effort to have the latter poisoned, only to be poisoned himself along with the rest of his family by Bagoas, who put Arses' cousin Darius III on the throne.



Darius III (Artashata), called Codomannus by the Greeks, was the last king of the Achaemenid Empire of Persia, from 336 to **330 BCE**. Artashata adopted Darius as a dynastic name. His empire was unstable, with large portions governed by jealous and unreliable satraps and inhabited by disaffected and rebellious subjects.

In 334 BCE, **Alexander the Great** began his invasion of the Persian Empire and subsequently defeated the Persians in a number of battles before looting and destroying their capital, Persepolis, by fire in **330 BCE**. With the Persian Empire now effectively under Alexander's control, Alexander then decided to pursue Darius. Before Alexander reached him, however, Darius was killed by his cousin Satrap Bessus. Alexander buried Darius III next to his Achaemenid predecessors in a full military funeral. Alexander eventually married Darius III' daughter Stateira at Susa in 324 BCE.



Alexander III of Macedon (20/21 July 356 BCE – 10/11 June 323 BCE), commonly known as **Alexander the Great**, was a king of the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon and a member of the Argead dynasty. He was born in Pella in 356 BCE and succeeded his father Philip II to the throne at the age of 20. He spent most of his ruling years on an unprecedented military campaign through Asia and northeast Africa, creating one of the largest empires of the ancient world by the age of thirty, stretching from Greece to northwestern India. He was undefeated in battle and is widely considered one of history's most successful military commanders.

According to the Talmud, when Alexander the Great marched through the Land of Israel in 332 BCE, Shimon Hatzaddik, dressed in his priestly garments, went to Antipatris to meet him (Yoma 69a).

According to Josephus, the Kohen Gadol in this story was the last Kohen Gadol mentioned in the Tanach, Jaddua ben Johanan (Antiquities, Book 11, Chapter 8), while Shimon Hatzaddik (Shimon I ben Chonyo I), was the grandson of Jaddua, served during the reign of Ptolemy I Soter (305-283 BCE). [The scholarly consensus of the late 20th century is that Shimon Hatzaddik is Shimon II ben Chonyo II (219–196 BCE)].

Historical Achashverosh

- The primary candidate for a historical Achashverosh is Xerxes the Great, who reigned for 21 years from October 486 BCE until his assassination in August 465 BCE at the hands of Artabanus, the captain of the royal bodyguard, and the king's eunuch, Mithridates. He was a son and successor of Darius the Great and his mother was Atossa, a daughter of Cyrus the Great, the first Achaemenid king. Like his father and predecessor Darius I, he ruled the empire at its territorial apex.
- His Persian name was *Khshaya-rsha*, which means "ruling over heroes". It is easily seen that name Khshaya-rsha is very close to the name **אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ**. In terms of the consonantal sounds ("kh", "sh", "r" and "sh"), the names are exactly the same. The Hebrew added an initial aleph, referred to by linguists as a "prosthetic aleph," and also exchanged the "y" sound for a vav. The Aramaic documents from Elephantine in Egypt, dating to the 5th century BCE, have this king's name spelled in Aramaic as **חַשִּירֵשׁ**, **חַשִּירֵשׁ** and **אַחֲשִירֵשׁ**, forms very close to the Hebrew **אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ**, **אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ** and **אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ** found in the Megillah.
- According to Greek historians, his wife's name was Amestris. The "is" at the end is just a Greek suffix added to turn the foreign name into proper Greek grammatical form (just as "es" was added at the end of "Xerxes"). The name Amestris is based around the consonants M, S, T, and R, and the name as recorded in the Megillah is based around the consonants S, T, and R. Very likely, this is not coincidence; and her Persian name was composed of the consonants M, S, T, and R, and the M was not preserved in the Hebrew.
- An Old Persian cuneiform foundation inscription records that the palace at Susa, the one referred to throughout the Megillah, was built by Darius the Great, the Xerxes's father. Xerxes also maintained the Royal Road built by his father, completed the Susa Gate and built a palace in Susa (Shushan), his favorite winter capital, known for its warm climate.
- The four years between the deposition of Vashti and the installation of Esther as queen in the Megillah, coincide with the years Xerxes was absent from Persia on the expedition against the Greeks, returning to Susa in the fall of 479 BCE.
- The Megillah does not mention the names of the kings who preceded or followed Achashverosh. But Achashverosh is also mentioned one time in the fourth chapter of the book of Ezra in the context of other Persian kings:
 - A. They would hire advisors against them to frustrate their plan, all the days of **Koresh**, the king of Persia, even until the reign of **Daryavesh**, the king of Persia. (Ezra 4:5)
 - B. And in the reign of **Achashverosh**, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the dwellers of Judea and Jerusalem. (Ezra 4:6)
 - C. And in the days of **Artakhshasta**, they wrote a complaint to the king that the Jews who arrived in Jerusalem by the king's order are rebuilding the city walls. (Ezra 4:7-23)

The verse Ezra 4:5 implies that one or more kings reigned between Cyrus and Darius. Otherwise, it would not have used the word *ve-ad* (even until). This alludes to the reigns of Cambyses and Bardiya. According to these verses, Achashverosh (Xerxes the Great) reigned between Daryavesh (Darius the Great), in whose reign the Temple was rebuilt, and Artakhshasta (Artaxerxes I).

Questions on Historical Achashverosh

- 1) What was the age of Mordechai and Esther at the time of Xerxes?

“There was a Judean man in Shushan the capital, whose name was Mordechai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, **a Benjamite, who had been exiled from Jerusalem with the exile that was exiled with Jeconiah, king of Judah**, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had exiled.” (Esther 2:5-6)

At first glance it looks that it was Mordechai who was exiled in 597 BCE with king Jeconiah. This would make him and Esther close to 120 years old at the time of Xerxes married Esther in the winter of the seventh year of his reign, 479/478 BCE.

However, the careful reading of these verses indicates that it was Mordechai's great grandfather Kish, who was exiled 120 years earlier. The name Mordechai itself is not of Hebrew origin, but rather a popular Babylonian name meaning "follower of Marduk", the chief Babylonian god. Esther's name as well, according to many scholars, is derived from the name of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. This is another proof that Mordechai and Esther were born much later in the deep Babylonian exile.

- 2) What about the prediction of three or four Persian kings in Daniel?

In the first year of Darius the Mede, Daniel was contemplating when the Temple would be rebuilt and then he was told about three or four more Persian kings. The passages below are connected together by a chronological marker:

- A. In the first year of Darius, the son of Ahasuerus of the seed of Media, who was crowned over the kingdom of the Chaldeans. In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, contemplated the calculations, the number of the years that the word of the Lord had come to Jeremiah the prophet, since the destruction of Jerusalem seventy years (Daniel 9:1-2).
- B. As for me, in the first year of Darius the Mede, I stood as a supporter and a stronghold for him. And now, I shall tell you the truth. Behold three more kings will arise **[in opposition]** in Persia, and the fourth one will become wealthy with great wealth, and when he becomes strong with his wealth, he will arouse all against the kingdom of Greece (Daniel 11:1-2).

At first glance it looks that there were only four Persian kings in total. However, these verses can be understood in the following way: In response to Daniel's question about when the Temple will be rebuilt, he was told that there will be three more Persian kings (Cyrus, Cambyses and Bardiya) before the Temple will be rebuilt in the reign of the fourth king, Darius the Great, who was known for his wars with Greece. The words in the brackets appear in the Septuagint.

3) What was a decree issued by King Artakhshasta in Ezra 4:7-23?

- A. According to the Talmudic tradition, Artakhshasta was a generic name for all Persian kings and this was a decree to stop rebuilding the Temple, which was issued by Koresh or Achashverosh, who is called Artakhshasta here. The Persian period spanned the reigns of only three Persian kings: Koresh, Achashverosh and Daryavesh, who is also called Artakhshasta in the later chapters of Ezra-Nehemiah (Rosh Hashanah 3b).
- B. According to Josephus, this King Artakhshasta was Cambyses who halted the construction of the Second Temple until the second year of Darius the Great (Antiquities, Book 11, Chapter 2). King Artakhshasta in the later chapters of Ezra-Nehemiah was Artaxerxes, who reigned after Xerxes.
- C. The proper understanding of chapter 4 in Ezra, only became evident in more recent times. The author of the book of Ezra decided to digress in verses 4:6-23, and to supplement the reference to accusations made against the Jews in the reigns of Cyrus through Darius the Great with mention of further accusations against them in the reigns of the subsequent kings, Xerxes and Artaxerxes. The verse 4:24 returns to the narrative of the verse 4:5.

There was only one king Artakhshasta in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah, and he was Artaxerxes I. Artaxerxes issued a decree to stop rebuilding Jerusalem until further notice for political reasons, after he received complaints that the Jews, who arrived in Jerusalem by his order [together with Ezra], are rebuilding the city walls. The complainers, who wrote in Aramaic script and language, reported that the Jews are rebuilding the city and the walls [and not the Temple]:

“Let it be known to the king that the Jews who ascended from you upon us have come to Jerusalem, the rebellious and sinful city they are building, and the walls they have completed, and the walls they have joined.” (Ezra 4:12)

They also threatened to destroy the Temple if the Jews would not stop rebuilding the city walls. As we know the Temple was completed and Aramaic script and language became the official language of the Persian Empire under Darius the Great. These events could then take place only after the reign of Darius. Artaxerxes later rescinded his decree when Nechemiah requested permission to rebuild Jerusalem and its walls.

Chronology of the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah

- 1) 538 BCE: The Cyrus Proclamation allowing Jews to ascend to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1-4). Jews ascended to Jerusalem under the leadership of Jeshua son of Jehozadak and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel. They set the altar on its base and offered up burnt offerings in the seventh month (Ezra 3:1-6). The next year the builders laid the foundation of the Temple (Ezra 3:10-13).
- 2) 537-520 BCE: The people of the land approached Jews with a request to build the Temple together, but were refused (Ezra 4:1-3). The people of the land were hindering the people of Judea and frightening them from building the Temple. They would hire advisors against them to frustrate their plans all the days of Cyrus until the reign of Darius the Great (Ezra 4:4-5 and 4:24).
- 3) 520 BCE: In the second year of Darius the Great, there came a prophecy to Haggai and Zechariah to build the edifice of the Temple. Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua, the son of Jehozadak arose and commenced to build the House of God (Ezra 5:1-2).
- 4) 520 BCE: Tattenai, the governor, and Shethar-Bozenai, and his companies, who are on the other side of the river, sent to Darius the Great a letter requiring clarification if building the Temple was authorized by Cyrus (Ezra 5:6-17). Darius confirmed that Cyrus authorized building the Temple and ordered the expediting of the project (Ezra 6:1-13). **Note, that no other decree to stop building the Temple has been ever mentioned.**
- 5) Early 515 BCE: The construction of the Temple was completed on Adar 3rd, in the 6th year of Darius the Great (Ezra 6:15), seventy years after the First Temple was destroyed in 586 BCE.
- 6) 486-465 BCE: In the reign of Xerxes (Achashverosh), in the beginning of his reign, the people of the land wrote an accusation against the dwellers of Judea and Jerusalem (Ezra 4:6).
- 7) 458 BCE: In the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (Artakhshasta), king commissioned Ezra HaKohen to bring more people from Babylon to Jerusalem, as well as silver and gold, and the vessels for the service of the House of God, and the rest of the necessities of the House of God; and to appoint judges and magistrates who will judge all the people (Ezra 7 and 8).
- 8) 458-445 BCE: Mithredath Tabeel, Rehum, Shimshai and the rest of his colleagues wrote a complaint to Artaxerxes that the Jews who arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon by his order are working to rebuild the city and the city walls in order to rebel against the king. The complainers threatened to destroy the Temple. Artaxerxes issued an order to stop construction until further notice (Ezra 4:7-23).
- 9) 445-433 BCE: In the 20th year of Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah learned that people in Judea are in great trouble and reproach; and the wall of Jerusalem is breached, and its gates were burned with fire. He then requested from Artaxerxes that he should be sent to Judea, to the city of Jerusalem and he shall build it (Nehemiah 1, 2). Nehemiah was then appointed as a governor of Judea and he was able to restore the walls of Jerusalem and rebuild the city (Nehemiah 6).

Appendix

Seventy years of Babylon (609-539 BCE)

- 1) For so said the Lord: For **at the completion of seventy years of Babylon I will remember you**, and I will fulfill My good word toward you, to restore you to this place. (Jeremiah 29:10).
- 2) And in the first year of Cyrus, the king of Persia (538 BCE), **at the completion of the word of the Lord from the mouth of Jeremiah**, the Lord aroused the spirit of Cyrus, the king of Persia, and he issued a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also in writing, saying: "So said Cyrus, the king of Persia, `All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of the heavens delivered to me, and He commanded me to build Him a House in Jerusalem, which is in Judea.'" (Ezra 1:1-2).

Seventy years of desolation (586–516 BCE)

- 1) And **all this land shall become waste [and] desolation, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon for seventy years**. (Jeremiah 25:11)
- 2) In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, contemplated the calculations, the number of the years that the word of the Lord had come to Jeremiah the prophet, **since the destruction of Jerusalem seventy years**. (Daniel 9:2)

Seventy years mentioned in Zechariah

- 1) In the 2nd year of Darius the Great (520 BCE): "And the angel of the Lord replied and said, "O Lord of Hosts! How long will You not have mercy on Jerusalem and upon the cities of Judah, upon whom You were in fury for [almost] **seventy years already?**" (Zechariah 1:12)
- 2) In the 4th year of Darius the Great (518 BCE): "Say to all the people of the land and to the priests saying: When you fasted and mourned in the fifth [month] and in the seventh [month] even **these seventy years**, did you fast for Me, even for Me?" (Zechariah 7:5)

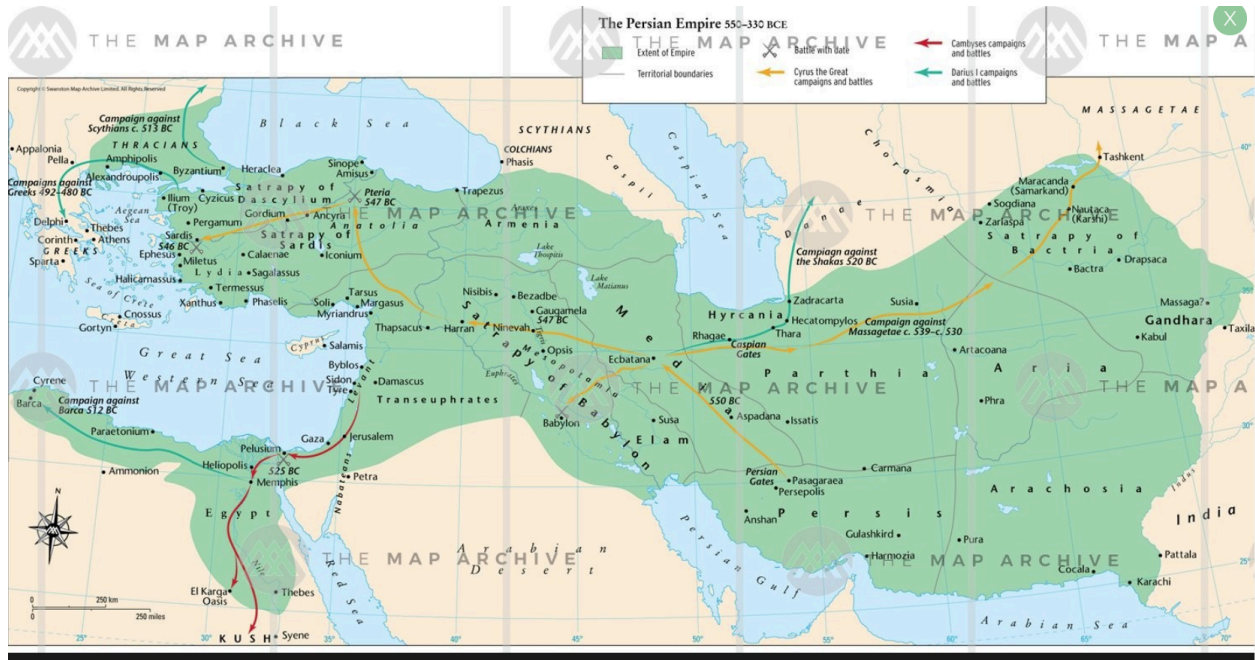
Twenty-one days of the Persian prince in Daniel

The length of the Persian rule, a period between two major world history events, the Persian conquest of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and the Greek conquest of the Persian Empire, was about 210 years (539-330 BCE)

*"And the prince of the kingdom of Persia has been standing against me for **twenty-one days**. And now I shall return to battle with the prince of Persia; then I shall leave, and behold the prince of Greece is coming."* (Daniel 10:13-20)

This verse can be understood referring either to roughly 21 regnal years of the Persian rule before the Temple was completed (538-517 BCE) or to 210 years of the Persian Empire (539-330 BCE), assuming that each day in Daniel can be translated to 10 actual years.

The Persian Empire expansion 559-330 BCE. **Yellow arrows** – Cyrus the Great campaigns and battles. **Red arrows** – Cambyses campaigns and battles. **Green arrows** – Darius the Great campaigns and battles.



Further Readings

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